

Cheryl Brown Henderson

The Brown Foundation Story

Developing Resources to Interpret Public History

Historic events occur almost daily and usually with a whimper, not a bang. This country is resplendent with ordinary people engaged in extraordinary work on behalf of their communities, states, and sometimes this nation. Most often when these happenings reach the light of day, how they were truly able to unfold remains a mystery. Such is the case with one of this nation's most heralded milestones, the landmark U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Oliver Brown et. al. vs The Board of Education of Topeka*. Oliver Brown was my father, who died in 1961. For my family, the significance of his passing was intensely personal yet profoundly public. In addition to his physical death, we also lost an opportunity to learn his views about the famous case which bears his name.

Jerry Jones, Mark Stueve, and Cheryl Brown Henderson.



Within the last twenty years we have lost both attorneys and plaintiffs involved in the five cases that comprise *Brown*, including Charles Scott and John Scott, two of the four NAACP attorneys in Topeka who conceived of the local strategy employed against the Board of Education. Thurgood Marshall's death seemed to signal the end of an era. The loss of this living history heightened the need to research and preserve their work for the benefit of future generations.

In January of 1988, I sat visiting with a young man new to the Topeka community. His name was Jerry Jones and he would have an unparalleled effect on my life and the lives of my family. As he and I prepared to attend one of the many observances of the birthday of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Jerry asked a seemingly innocent question. What is being done to commemorate the anniversary of *Brown vs The Board of Education*? My response of "not much" both shocked and challenged him. That visit and subsequent conversations developed into a personal mission for us to resurrect and share the *Brown* story. The task, however, would not be simple because we were up against several decades of media reports on this history. What became painfully clear is that the media-created version of *Brown* had eclipsed the facts. One soon understands that both the electronic and print media thrive on simplicity, sometimes omitting what is not convenient to the story they want to put forth.

We discovered that not only were anniversaries of this decision passing unnoted, history classes were only giving cursory mention to *Brown*. Like so many other communities that have a historic legacy of national significance or where historic battles have taken place, Topeka, Kansas was more interested in burying this aspect of its past than boasting of any involvement. America in the 1950s had left its mark and its residue of racial mistrust. Our challenge became how to commemorate and interpret this history, not only for school children but also for the general public.

The climate in Topeka dictated that any organization we might conceive of had to go beyond commemorating dates and places, and include the

untold stories of many individuals who had been on the front line of this school integration struggle. The mission now involved using public history to heal old wounds created by historic omissions and inaccuracies. Some local citizens believed the *Brown* case negatively stigmatized the city. It was obvious that our success would require organizing volunteers from various backgrounds in order to uncover historic connections across the community and the communities of the remaining four cases that comprise *Brown*. This meant also reaching out to individuals in Delaware, Virginia, South Carolina, and Washington, DC.

Out of our work and creativity came the Brown Foundation for Educational Equity,



Participants and plaintiffs in the *Brown* case in front of the Monroe School in 1994. Left to right: Carol Kay Lawton Nutter, Leola Montgomery, Linda Brown Thompson, Victoria Lawton Benson, Ruth Ann Scales, Vivian Scales, Lena Carper, Zelma Henderson. Photo courtesy Topeka Capital Journal.

Excellence, and Research. We believed this organization should continue the quest for educational equity began by the *Brown* decision. The Brown Foundation is a Kansas-based non-

profit organization with a mission and purpose designed to further educational equity and multicultural understanding in order to improve the quality of life for individuals and strengthen our overall sense of community. The Foundation provides scholarships to minority students entering teacher education, sponsors programs with emphasis on racial/ethnic diversity, and supports historic research and other such educational activities in keeping with its basic purpose.

In 1990, again with the support of Jerry Jones, I found myself on a second road on the way to realizing the mission of sharing the *Brown* story. The former Monroe Elementary School, which had once served as one of four segregated schools for African-American children, now stood empty and was up for sale. The availability of this site added a new dimension to preserving the history of *Brown*. Attempting to save this building led to the uncharted work of establishing a national park in Topeka, Kansas, to interpret the history of the *Brown* case. Using the lessons learned while creating the Brown Foundation, my first step was to organize a cross-section of community volunteers into a task force and to enlist the support of the property owner, Mark Stueve. The task at hand was how to convince the U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, and the U.S.

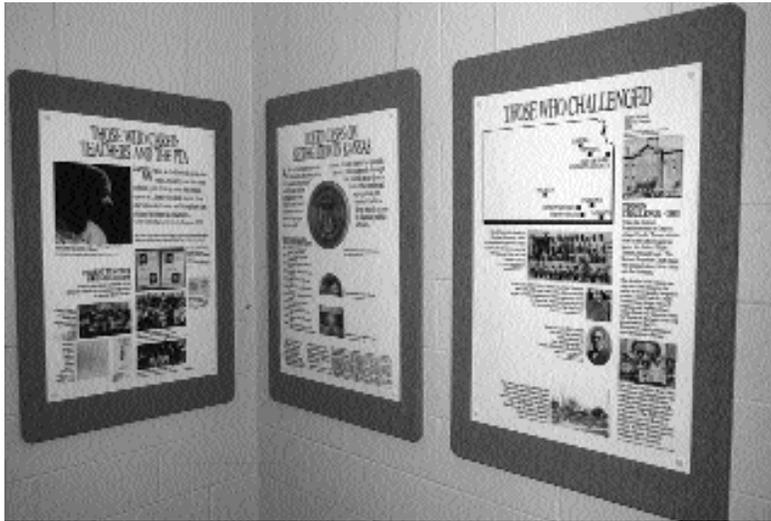
Congress that interpreting the *Brown* story was in the interest of the American people regardless of race, gender, or ethnicity. The experience of leading this initiative left me with an extremely pleasing revelation—our system of government works exactly as it is intended, we have only to insist that it respond. Although this statement is simplistic, it goes to the heart of how our persistence resulted in the *Brown vs. the Board of Education National Historic Site Act of 1992*. Now under the direction of the National Park Service, work is underway to plan for this new unit of the NPS scheduled to open in the late 1990s. The Brown Foundation is working cooperatively with the NPS and has the unique distinction of being one of a handful of non-governmental agencies that provide researchers, educators, museums, etc., with primary source information about the *Brown* case.

Since its inception, the Foundation has actively engaged in the discipline of public history by developing:

- an oral history collection focusing on the pre- and post-*Brown* era;
- a traveling exhibit of photos and text that examine the history of school integration;
- a tour of historic sites associated with the Topeka, Kansas case;
- a national symposium convened annually to revisit the tenets of *Brown* and its continued impact;
- classroom presentations and university lectures recounting the events surrounding *Brown*;
- an activity booklet on *Brown* for elementary school children;
- a video tape on *Brown v. Board* (in production).

The Foundation's public history work is based on a belief that education programs that step out of the modality of text books play a critical role in helping the public develop a better awareness and understanding of history. For example, the use of exhibits that can travel from place to place provide a vehicle for sharing photos and narrative that personalize historic events. Often the curricular resources available are one dimensional in their perspective and leave out substance with respect to who, what, when, where, why, and how.

In 1993, the Foundation unveiled its traveling exhibit entitled *In Pursuit of Freedom and Equality*. This exciting visual presentation examines the historical record before, during, and after the *Brown* decision. The exhibit uses photos, quotes, maps, newspaper headlines and short explanatory narratives to interpret the issues of segregation and education. This project was funded in part by the Kansas Humanities Council. The



Traveling exhibit "In Pursuit of Freedom and Equality: Kansas and the African American Public School Experience, 1855 to 1955" on display at the Washburn University Law School, Topeka, KS.

content was developed in consultation with humanities scholars from the fields of history, jurisprudence, and minority studies. This integrated humanities approach made it possible to present a thorough examination and discussion of the complexities and the role of the *Brown* case in American educational history. Few people realize that as early as 1849 African Americans fought the system of education in this country that mandated separate schools for their children based solely on race. Kansas attempted 11 legal challenges for school integration before *Brown*. In addition, this approach focuses attention on how *Brown* provided the legal framework which enhanced the development of crucial activities of the civil rights movement.

The traveling exhibit is a 12-panel display mounted on a Nimlock system. The mounting is a series of six two-sided exhibit boards measuring 3' x 4' attached to 8' poles. When on display, space must be provided for viewers to walk freely on both sides of the exhibit. The Foundation produced three sets of this exhibit, one of which is on permanent display at the Washburn University Law Library. The attorneys for the Topeka case received their law degrees from this institution. The remaining sets are traveling displays. One set travels only in Kansas and the other nationwide.

The following are some of the issues illustrated by the exhibit:

- Education as a first act of freedom for African Americans.
- The exodus from post Civil War South.
- Seeking equal educational opportunity.
- Early legal challenges to segregated schools.
- African American parent teacher organizations.
- Achievement under segregation.
- The continued struggle for liberty and equal opportunity.

The Brown Foundation's experience with creating resources to document and interpret public history is one example of a local initiative to preserve a community legacy. Without such initiatives, events in America's past that are not recounted in history books would remain unknown. The Brown Foundation's vision recognizes that history is studied to know the past, to understand the present, and to plan for the future. The true history makers are not those who leave written records; the true history-makers are the people who get involved simply to make life better for the next generation.

Cheryl Brown Henderson is co-founder and Executive Director of the Brown Foundation. To borrow the traveling exhibit or to learn about other resources, write: Brown Foundation, P.O. Box 4862, Topeka, KS 66604.

Related CRM Articles

"Landmarks of Democracy—The U.S. Constitution, A National Historic Landmark Theme Study," *CRM Bulletin*, Vol. 10, No. 2, 1987.

"Black History," *CRM Bulletin*, Vol. 12, No. 1, 1989.

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"New NPS Unit Commemorates Civil Rights: *Brown v. Board of Education* National Historic Site," *CRM*, Vol. 16, No. 5, 1993.

"Preserving the Legacy: Georgia's Historic African-American Resources," *CRM*, Vol. 17, No. 2, 1994.

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"Landmark Decision: Remembering the Struggle for Equal Education," *CRM*, Vol. 18, No. 6, 1995.

"Landmarks of Chicago Blues and Gospel: Chess Records and First Church of Deliverance," *CRM*, Vol. 18, No. 8, 1995.